

# A glimpse at the earliest years of Canadian Parents for French

*Presentation to the 2013 CPF British Columbia & Yukon conference by Judy Gibson, BC Branch President 1978-1981*

## Why was CPF established and what did we do?

The story of CPF actually began long before 1977. A complex web of movements and trends, actions and reactions, and the right people in the right place at the right time led to the birth of our organization.

The 1867 Constitution Act established English and French as languages of parliament, the Quebec legislature, and federal and Quebec courts – and that was about it. It would be 70 years before both languages even appeared on our paper currency, and 92 years before simultaneous interpretation was available to all those unilingual MPs in the House of Commons.

In 1960 a Quebec provincial election began a decade now called the “Quiet Revolution.” Until then, the mainly unilingual Anglophone community controlled most elite positions in the province’s businesses and industry. One result of the new government’s sweeping reforms was to greatly diminish that power.

However, the teaching of French in Quebec’s English-language schools was no more successful than in the rest of Canada: verbs were parsed, sounds were practiced, simple sentences were memorized – and fluency remained elusive.

Anglophone parents were beginning to realize this could not continue: their children would need a strong command of French to succeed in a much-changed Quebec. Three mothers in the Montreal suburb of St. Lambert began a crusade to develop a much more effective language teaching method. In this they were assisted by experimental psychologist Wallace Lambert and neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield. Eventually, and with great reluctance, the school district agreed to set up an experimental kindergarten class called “French immersion” for September 1965. The district’s other brilliant decision was to have researchers monitor the impact of this radical new program on the students’ learning.<sup>1</sup>

102 years after confederation, the Trudeau government passed the Official Languages Act. It was based on recommendations from a Royal Commission on Bilingualism & Biculturalism about steps to be taken to “develop the Canadian Confederation on the basis of an equal partnership between two founding races.” The flamboyant, outspoken journalist Keith Spicer was appointed as the first Commissioner of Official Languages.

*(important footnote)* Neither the Official Languages Act of 1969 nor the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms of 1982 gives children the right to learn their second official language. However, they do require the federal government to foster the use of both official languages and enhance opportunities to learn both.

*(back to the CPF story)* It was increasingly apparent – even to those of us as far west as BC – that Canada would no longer comprise “two solitudes.” In future, fluency in French would be critical in many fields, from flight attendant to Prime Minister, and an asset in many others. Meanwhile, word of the success of the St. Lambert experiment was spreading by word-of-mouth

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<sup>1</sup> see “The Lambert Immersion Legacy: Research and Mentorship” beginning on page 11 of the fall/winter 2013 edition of the *CPF Magazine*

across the country, between friends and relatives and among language educators.

By the mid-1970s, immersion could be found in many larger centers across the country. The first program in BC was established in 1968 in the Maillardville area of Coquitlam at the request of the Franco-Columbian Federation. Before long, the majority of the students in those classes were from Anglophone families taking advantage of the opportunity for their children. Immersion began in Vancouver and Victoria four or five years later. Then, in response to parental demands, the program expanded in September 1977 to Burnaby, Surrey, Nanaimo, and – believe it or not – Burns Lake!

Sometimes the requests of parents were received by open minds. The first CPF - BC newsletter reported, “The Cowichan Valley Parents for French, led by Patricia Hocker, presented a brief to the Board of Trustees ... recommending that an ongoing French Immersion Program be instituted in the district commencing at the kindergarten level in September, 1978. The Board then conducted a feasibility study and a poll and enough parents were interested for the program to be confirmed for [that] fall.”<sup>2</sup>

In other cases, as described by Keith Spicer, “bigoted and myopic local school boards stymied better teaching of French.”<sup>3</sup> For example, in Saanich, the first request came from 17 families in the spring of 1977. It was defeated by a 4-3 vote of the school board. Opponents considered the program to be elitist and warned of increased costs to local taxpayers (*sound familiar?*). It took the Saanich parents years of presenting briefs, lobbying influential community members, and electing two new trustees to the school board. Their immersion program began in 1981 – much too late for the children of the original families.

During his travels as Languages Commissioner, Spicer met many parents who were working to establish immersion programs or extend existing programs into the secondary grades. In his autobiography, he says the idea of bringing representatives to Ottawa “to pool ideas and energies” came to him while chatting with a “group of discouraged parents” in a Calgary living room.<sup>3</sup>

In March 1977 Spicer hosted 28 parents from all ten provinces at a weekend “Parents Conference on French Language and Exchange Opportunities.” They included Deirdre Vincente and Anita Hadley of Victoria, Judi Madley of Vancouver, and Bev LeFrançois of Coquitlam.

Experts gave presentations on research findings, youth exchanges, and jurisdiction in language issues. The participants shared stories from their home communities to identify common problem areas. By noon on March 27, goals for a new parents’ association were drafted and a Provisional Executive Committee was elected. The first President was Pat Webster, a mother from Oakville, Ontario, who had her fourth child, an infant daughter, with her at the conference. According to Spicer, seed money was provided in the form of a \$5,000 donation from Pat’s husband, journalist Norman Webster.

The conference participants returned to their provinces to spread the word and build a national mailing list of interested individuals, including many parents from my daughter’s kindergarten class in Port Coquitlam. Within a year, that list included more than 500 British Columbians. By the fall of 1978 the BC branch was incorporated as a non-profit association, with a provincial executive of five and local representatives in 17 communities from Victoria to Prince George. The president of each of the provincial branches did double duty, also sitting on the national Board of Directors under the chairmanship of a nationally-elected President.

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<sup>2</sup> “Success Stories,” *B.C. Parents for French* (March 1978), p.3

<sup>3</sup> Keith Spicer, *Life Sentences: Memoirs of an Incurable Canadian* (Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2004), pp.142-143

I wonder if Spicer envisioned what an explosion of productive activity he would unleash at his little conference – or if he imagined that the new parents’ organization would still be playing a critical role 36 years later.

As I mention just a few examples of our earliest, ground-breaking achievements, think about the extent to which CPF continues to fill each of these needs. During our first six years:

- We prepared the first layman’s guide to the federal funding for French-second-language education. This was, as historian Matthew Hayday put it, “to prevent provincial and local governments from using confusion over the [funding program] as a smokescreen for not expanding their programs.”<sup>4</sup>
- We gathered and circulated the first Canada-wide directory of bilingual exchange programs, residential summer camps, and summer French courses.
- We published the first bibliography of research on French-second-language education in Canada.
- We published the first book for parents on FSL instruction, a compilation of articles by researchers, educators, and parents called *So You Want Your Child to Learn French!* Topics ranged from “Cognitive Development and Early French Immersion” to “French for Your Child: How to Get What You Want.” It was so successful, a few years later we published a companion book called *More French, s’il vous plait!*
- We produced the first directory of French immersion programs across Canada, gathered painstakingly by CPF provincial and community contacts, mainly to help moving families but also to encourage networking among educators.
- We co-sponsored, with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, a booklet called *French Immersion: The Trial Balloon That Flew*. Written for students aged 11 to 15, it was designed to encourage them to keep up their French skills through high school and beyond.

By the way, the first pamphlet we produced for use across the country was adapted in 1980 from a document prepared by Peggy Robertson and her group in Richmond called “How to be an Immersion Parent.” It answered many questions I’m sure you’re still hearing today.

From the beginning, most CPF groups organized extra-curricular activities for the students. The innovative and resoundingly successful BC Family French Camp began in 1981 as a project of the North Vancouver chapter. In the spring of 1985, CPF took over the organization of a public speaking event begun in BC two years earlier by Professor André Obadia of SFU. We re-named it the *Concours d’art oratoire*.

All this fuelled a rapid spread of immersion to more and more schools, in more and more communities. In CPF’s first 13 years, enrolment grew across Canada by 750%.

It was far from smooth sailing, though. For example, you’re probably aware of the federal funding for minority and second official language education, which began in 1970. Well, imagine how your school board would react if that financial support disappeared. That’s what we faced while CPF was still in its infancy!

Because they were based in part on enrolments, the federal contributions more than quadrupled between 1970 and 1978 – and it was obvious that official language education programs would continue to grow. When the Secretary of State (now the Minister of Canadian Heritage) proposed to cut back on the funding – after all, education is a provincial responsibility

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Hayday, *Bilingual Today, United Tomorrow: Official Languages in Education and Canadian Federalism* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), chapter 4

– the provinces refused to sign a new multi-year agreement. There were also very thorny issues around the division of these funds among the provinces and federal demands for more accountability for the use of the funds – issues that are still with us today.

From her home in Victoria, national President Janet Poyen – with help from our Executive Secretary and the CPF Ontario President – thoroughly researched the issue, made public the background to the funding and the reasons for the impasse, and met with numerous federal and provincial politicians and officials. Branch Presidents also met with federal and provincial ministers, while parents wrote letters ... and more letters. In effect, CPF tried to mediate between the two levels of government by proposing practical solutions that didn't favour one over the other.

After four long, nail-biting years, a new federal-provincial funding agreement was finally signed. There were important provisions within the 1983 and all subsequent agreements which strongly echoed CPF suggestions. Janet Poyen also reports, "CPF seemed to enjoy greater status shortly thereafter. The organization began to receive much larger grants to sustain its [own] operations. The Minister began appearing at [our] national conferences. Communications with higher level officials increased."<sup>5</sup>

That crisis past, others came barrelling toward us. With the dramatic spread of immersion and the rapid increase in enrolments came high profile, front-page criticism of the program.

From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, there was a great deal of public controversy – throughout Canada, but especially in BC – around claims by SFU linguistics professor Hector Hammerly that immersion was a flawed approach to language teaching that results in graduates who speak "Frenghish." He wrote articles, letters to the editor, and a book called *French Immersion: Myths and Reality*. He claimed that the researchers who had been studying immersion were involved in a cover-up.

In 1992 Canadian Parents for French, national President Pat Brehaut, and French immersion were all attacked in an "open letter" letter from "a group of concerned parents in Ontario" that appeared in many smaller newspapers. Among the claims made about "possible and probable casualties of early French immersion programs," the letter said such students "could be among the 77% of dropouts from high school" and "could encounter behavioral problems that will be difficult to diagnose or correct."<sup>6</sup>

Then, in September 1994, *Saturday Night* magazine published an article entitled "False Immersion." Author Carol Milstone complained that "CPF soon turned French immersion into a sacred cow" and ended, "The trouble is that when it comes to French immersion parental faith has been shaped by false hopes, false promises, and false illusions – all fuelled by the government of Canada's bilingual dream machine."<sup>7</sup>

In all such cases, CPF was able to work with researchers and educators in order to arm its spokespersons with effective rebuttals. From Port Alberni to St. John's, our members were able to respond in a reasonable and knowledgeable fashion.

In summary, then, Canadian Parents for French has made – and is continuing to make – a tremendous difference, not just to FSL education but to our country as a whole. The challenges

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<sup>5</sup> Janet Poyen, "Canadian Parents for French: A National Pressure Group in Canadian Education" (M.A. thesis, University of Calgary, 1989), p.83

<sup>6</sup> Mallory, Wood & Campbell Associates, "Promoting English ensures better future for kids," *The Lakeside Leader*, Slave Lake AB, September 30, 1992

<sup>7</sup> Carol Milstone, "False Immersion," *Saturday Night*, September 1994, pp.14 & 18

presented in the 1960s by a new vision of Canada have been met in large part by ordinary parents, starting with three Anglophone mothers from St. Lambert and continuing to this day through the excellent work all of you are doing.

The Official Languages Act established *institutional* bilingualism for our country. Within just two decades, said CPF national President Stewart Goodings, “CPF’s achievement has been to legitimize the concept of *personal* bilingualism across Canada.”<sup>8</sup>

## The view from inside our organization

CPF was founded 20 years or more before e-mail and Google. We had to communicate by letter and telephone. We painstakingly typed correspondence, briefs, and newsletters. Liquid paper was our best friend, and we made carbon copies for our own records. I remember early work parties where hundreds of photocopied provincial newsletters were collated, stapled, folded, addressed, and stamped by hand.

You can understand why the birth of CPF in 1977 made such a difference to the many isolated little groups of parents working in their communities to get immersion started. Suddenly in their mail boxes arrived the answers to many of the difficult questions they’d been fielding. Now they had a way to share ideas and strategies, how-to information, and success stories. They could get training around lobbying school boards, writing news releases, handling media interviews, running meetings, organizing summer camps. There were information sessions and conferences where researchers presented the results of their FSL studies. And there were books, pamphlets, and posters to help with program promotion.

In short, to energy and enthusiasm were added information and resources – it was a potent combination!

I focussed above on French immersion because it was the exciting revolution in second-language education that coincided with the political changes of the time. Immersion was the reason for CPF’s inception. However, from a resolution at the founding conference right until today, CPF has also actively promoted and supported efforts to increase the effectiveness of core French.

Last year Matthew Hayday, a historian from the University of Guelph who’s currently writing a book on this period, was asked why CPF continued to be so successful while opponents like Hammerly and Milstone came and went. His answer was that the people in CPF did their homework.

We put in the time to understand the research, statistics, laws, and policies – and to cite them accurately. We acknowledged difficulties where they existed. We took care to develop balanced, measured responses and to suggest positive solutions. We attempted to work with, rather than against, those we were trying to influence. And we didn’t just ask of others: we contributed directly to the success of FSL through our own projects and programs. Although we rarely grabbed front-page headlines, the reasoned, moderate, but persistent voice of CPF has proven incredibly successful over the long term.

All of this – and so much more I could easily take another couple of hours – was accomplished almost entirely by volunteers. CPF started with one part-time employee, called an Executive Secretary. In 1980 there were just 2½ staff persons serving the entire organization from a small office in Ottawa. It was several years before the branches were able to set up very

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<sup>8</sup> Stewart Goodings, “A small miracle - Canadian Parents for French 20 years on,” *CPF National News* 73 (1997), p.3.

modest offices and hire administrative-secretary type support staff, many just part-time. The branch Executive Director positions weren't established until the turn of the century.

All of this was also accomplished on a shoestring budget. I previously mentioned our frantic four-year effort to get a new federal-provincial agreement on the official languages in education funding. At the same time we were fighting for our own survival! Our early funding from the federal government comprised a series of grants for specific projects. Perhaps the most migraine-inducing example occurred in 1979: with a Montreal hotel booked for the third national conference and with delegates from across the country packing their bags, we didn't receive approval of our grant from the Secretary of State until a week or so before the event!

Much like their attitude towards the provinces, federal officials thought they had given us a start and we could make it on our own, through memberships, donations, and fundraising. But our ability to raise funds was extremely limited. I clearly remember the vigorous debate at the national board table in early 1979 over instituting a \$5 membership fee. The branch President from PEI was convinced that by charging a fee we'd lose most of the people then on our contact list. I argued that we needed not just the funds but also the credibility and legitimacy that would come from a committed membership.

Over the years, CPF has enjoyed invaluable partnerships. The long list includes each of the Commissioners of Official Languages, a great many researchers who have given generously of their time and knowledge, and several other organizations whose mandates overlap ours in various ways.

From the very first day, the BC branch was extremely lucky to have many such friends. A number of educators – such as Florence Wilton, French Coordinator for District 43 (who for many years was affectionately known as the “godmother of immersion in BC”), and Nick Ardanaz, the first Director of French Language Services for the BC Ministry of Education – not only provided invaluable advice and moral support, but also went out of their way to say very flattering things about CPF at every possible opportunity. Local FSL researchers, including Robert Roy of UBC and Stan Shapson of SFU, answered endless questions and gave generously of their time to speak at innumerable CPF meetings. A program officer in the Vancouver office of the Secretary of State (now Canadian Heritage) broke new ground by stretching the rules for grants designed for minority language groups in order to support some early branch initiatives.

I like the way founding President Pat Webster described the earliest years of CPF: “Our audacity now leaves me breathless. We were parents from every province, from large cities and small towns, with little or no experience as lobbyists. Yet nothing fazed us. We believed that what we were doing was right. It was important, it was worth doing. We were a small group but we knew we could make a difference.”<sup>9</sup>

It all sounds very intense, and it was. But we also shared a great sense of accomplishment, and we were always ready to have fun when the opportunity presented itself. Many of us made life-long friendships.

There have been dramatic changes since March 1977: in French-second-language learning, in communications, even in volunteerism. But there is much left for CPF to do. So I've come back home this weekend to remind you of the power that parents can have when they “pool ideas and energies,” do their homework, take a positive approach – and don't forget to have a little fun along the way.

Thank you most sincerely for the work you're all doing to promote and support French-

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<sup>9</sup> Pat Webster, “Belief in Canadian unity led the way for CPF,” *CPF National News* 73 (1997), p.2.

second-language learning in your communities, your province, and all across Canada. *You* are going to ensure that FSL is even better by the time my great-grandchildren come along!

### **For more information**

If you'd like to learn more about the history of language and politics in Canada, including the response of our education system, a good place to start is the book *Sorry, I Don't Speak French: Confronting the Canadian Crisis That Won't Go Away* by Graham Fraser, the current Commissioner of Official Languages.

For a scholarly (but fascinating) analysis of official languages in education, try *Bilingual Today, United Tomorrow: Official Languages in Education and Canadian Federalism* by Matthew Hayday.

An article by Helen Raptis and Thomas Fleming of the University of Victoria provides some insights into the early politics of official languages in British Columbia. See "From 'La Plume de Ma Tante' to 'Parlez-Vous Français?' The Making of French Language Policy in British Columbia, 1945-1982" at

[www.umanitoba.ca/publications/cjeap/articles/miscellaneousArticles/raptis.html](http://www.umanitoba.ca/publications/cjeap/articles/miscellaneousArticles/raptis.html).